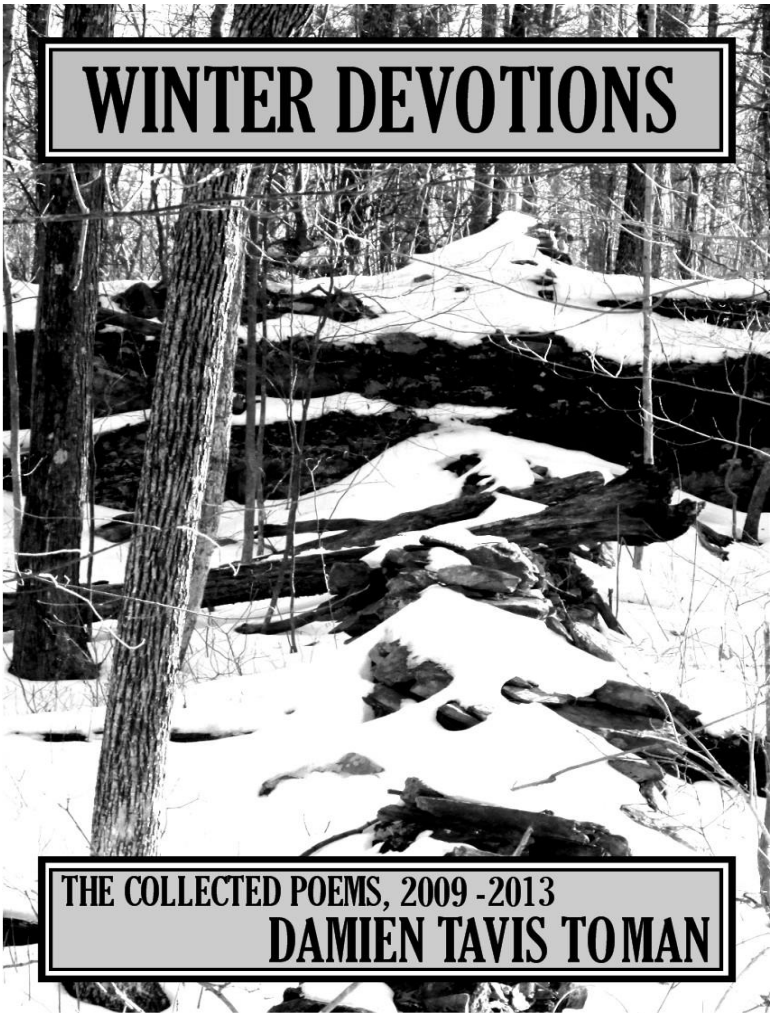
WINTER DEVOTIONS



THE COLLECTED POEMS, 2009 -2013

DAMIEN TAVIS TOMAN

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WHEN I SAY THAT I MISS YOU

When I say that I miss you, I will tell you what I mean:

I mean that dreams come as antagonists,
And my breath as an assassin,
And that my footsteps fall as archers do
From battlements,
With their blood and organs falling after.

I mean that my breast is a bellows of sighs,
Panting at embers as distant as stars,
Imparting and receiving nothing
From a void as old and unregarding

As the hollow face of Death.

I mean that all that I taste is the flavor of dust,
And I love with the love of a traitor,
And my grief is of the widower,
Who grieves to scorn
And scorns the end of grieving.

When I say that I miss you, I will tell you what I mean:

I mean that forgiveness
Is a cowardly kind of vengeance,
As you know –
Dear Misfortune!
As you know.

(April, 2009)

A PENITENT'S PRAYER

I want to go to bed in purity;
Oh, let me sleep thus
That no thought nor dream may censure me,
That no waving figure of remorse
May climb about my cringing head,
To drive my face down,
Self-smothering darkness to pursue.

What comes of men who lonely live,
And drinking all their wine up
In the daylight, pass to a whoresome muse
That knows their camp, and travels
Every Phaeton's round,

To snatch the payments from
their chaféd palms?

O misty Dawn's redemption, say
Tomorrow shall you take up
Your prodding with the pike that
drew
The Lamb's elixir from the cross
(Like ruddy wine, but by Eve's
kiss untouch'd)
At hard Judea's rending
Over my proud, ill-purposed lips
to pour!

God save me! Hear and
condescend,
One that confesses:
All your boons abhorred—
bowels, yes, and brain—
All with execration o'erruled

With Belfegor and Bacchus to carouse,
Whilst thou unshriven send me to my sobs!

So grant me now brief audience, O Lord,
With eyes lower'd and bowed,
A moment to behold your hallowed hurt,
Where twisteth I my hilt
That gilt in griméd guilt
Hath both our hopes undone, one hateful stroke!

(October, 2009)

A MONDAY MORNING HOMILY

Whiskey-soaked tobacco,
Pinched and withdrawn from
A bronze-bottomed glass,
Is flicked to the floor,
Not brought to the lips:
And so, whiskey-soaked,
Am I wasted.

I meditate on this and then
I meditate on Him
Who, whiskey-soaked from His
Bottomless grail,
Spoke soberly of the threshing floor,
Saying,
You, too, will be beaten
With rod and with flail,
Hacked from the husk
And mashed

Into host, my body;
Consumed. It was Sabbath day.

His disciples, half-drunk,
All had appetites.
The husbandmen were horrified,
And His heresies were numbered
By the hungry, mumbling
Pharisees nearby.

(February, 2010)

SUICIDE IN SAUGERTIES

Furious and frantic, she showed
Sharon to my side;
I was, by all accounts, beyond
retrieval. I cried:
I'm sorry, sister-in-law, but it's no
use, no, it's
Useless, I'm unhappy, God, so
unhappy, O! the gravity
Of words now works against me!
She held my hand. Her
Peculiar, many-angled face,
Anglo-Irish, graceful, made
No effort at expression: blank
contempt was all—but then
My eyes gushed, gushed with
tears, and I was shaking,
Shaking so the bed and
floorboards shook. No words
Could I pronounce now; through

hot cascades I sought my
Own wife's face - her hand now clenched my other hand, but I
Was not dying: only weeping, only saying, *Let me die, I*
Beg you, leave and close the door, call the coroner, he
Will thank you for the chance to prove his worth, but I'm
Not worth your tears or trouble.
And I observed that
Neither cried. Such stoic sisters!

(February, 2010)

SONNET

She was never yours, dear Dorothy,
Though first you thought to catch her from my arms;
Before those arms of adamant caught me,
They brought her up and sooth'd her shrill alarms,
While I, a doubting youth, made sport for thee,
In mirrored rooms, where twirl'd the rigid trunks
Of girls—now bunk'd your bleak army
Whose gunning mouths the poet's splendors sunk.
And I, your vassal, leapt, and fell, and crept,

Cow'ring quick, erect at your command,
Let weekends escape thus, and also weeks,
Deliv'ring her, my whole hope, to your hands,
For you alone subdued her scolding shrieks.
Yet never was she yours, for all your pain;
And I cannot restore faith never gain'd.

(February, 2010)

EMMANUEL

And we shall call your name Emmanuel;
God help us! Adulterers both,
And blowing on some snowball of an oath,
The flame behind the breath now cool, but well
It is to be as autumn is,
Blushing, fallen, bashful as the bride
Whose limbs are bared, her green dreams pried
By blizzard-fingers, Missus missing Miss
Then not at all—though Mister might
Miss her heartily! Now hushed connubial
Kisses taste of vinegar and gall,

And this is all, night after night,
This is all—this shuffling circuit traced
Through bathroom, bed, no-place!

(May, 2010)

PROCEDURE

For the last four years, I've been your lover;
Still I stand by the bed with my hands pressed together,
And I don't know quite how to begin.

I remember—God forgive me—how it was with my last wife—
How my hands flew like a migrant's
To divide her from her clothes;
And like a thresher I tore through her body.

But us—it takes two weeks to summon the urge,

And two weeks to make an appointment;
Then you lie on your back
As if strapped to a gurney
And you request a stronger anesthetic.

At nineteen years old, I formed a conviction
That nothing is sadder than sex.
Now nine years have passed—
I've been with three women,
And it's true: it gets sadder and sadder.

(May, 2010)

SONNET

Oh see, Jim, how the nights pass for us here,
You with your computer, I with mine,
As with the stillness of the building at our backs,
Our eyes lie fixed as corpses' milky stares,
And white upon our irises doth gleam
Those empty resurrected pageantries
Of film, whose empty occupants assume
For us life's shallow similitude.
Once, Jim – even as late as yesterday,
We briefly met as two men in the world,

And in our native English, tooth and tongue,
Conversed! And for our subject – life!
We gasped and strove like fishes out-of-pond,
But, finding no matched angles, formed no bond.

(July, 2010)

SONNET

Dorian Gray's dilemma, and his joy –
That same unending boyhood – is my own,
It seems; for now I'm twenty-eight,
And the mirror holds no more terror and no less
Than e'er it did when I was really young.
But beauty is not to all youth guaranteed,
And so my youthfulness is tendered gross:
While ugliness and age are nat'ral peers,
My aspect, though grotesque, shows not my years,

And neither for the other makes excuse.
So it is, I'm neither beautiful nor young;
So it is, when I was young, still I was plain,
And never, as I waste, may I recall
A day when youth meant anything at all.

(July, 2010)

SEPARATION SUIT

At the splitting of summer, when
icy fingers clutch the flanks of
the round-bodied mountains,
I proceed to the site of my
antique tragedy
Wearing my separation suit.

Red and gray it is—my suit—red
by gray encompassed: the cold
gray dome of shoulder, red,
embarrassed trunk
That's tapped and sapped of
vital stores,
Rushing, hot with whiskey.

(October, 2010)

SIBLING SCARECROW

Dear Brother, this is what I would have said,
Had not by pride and slowly sorting mind,
And weariness my good speech prevented,
So from a coarse and many-colored thread,
Did frayed persuasions faltering unwind:

As now you stand beneath your brave-bought beams,
Upon such planks as sing for infant heels,
While women's laughter through the door crack streams,
And at your feet a cherub daughter dreams,

So stood I once, in times now tear-concealed.

Though claim thou hast to an higher edifice,
Thy pride, I think, if set upon the scales,
Would not outweigh my own, when ‘twas my bliss
To say, “This is my chamber, and my parlor this;”
Etched prints of *Paradise* set arc-wise upon nails.

Thinkst I remember not? Brother, I do:
There’s nothing thou hast gained ere I have lost;
Nor need I wonder whence my fortunes flew,
And all accursed capital

accrued,
When crookedly I plighted treason's troth.

But like a faerie compact, bloody bond,
I prized my straw for gold and gold for hay;
And wife, too little cunning, over-fond,
Likewise a mate from meaner matter conned,
Which scandal's season sparked and burnt away.

But you, the pink-skinned son of Providence,
From whom all conflagration upwind blows,
Conceive no dread of Fortune's flashing dint;

Know you? To tinder-man God's
name is Flint,
I'm razed that Error's ember in
me glows.

(October, 2010)

WINTER DEVOTIONS

Cold air returns with the relenting of leaves, and again—as with last year—I lift up my head and trace every old autumn scent and every old autumn sight back to you. It is thus:

The burning wood is that wood which we carried in our arms to our new cabin door, depositing it wet and unready on a floor strewn with splinters and snowy footprints. Our different tracks ran across and atop each other like the desperate trajectories of moths; the dog's ran round and round them, evaporating when the long room warmed. We

called his name, and lay our faces between his hot ears, and hauled his thick scent through our dripping nostrils, cursing him, cursing his wonderful tongue. When the spring came, we gave him away.

The orange of the leaves is the orange of your coat: the first coat I knew you to wear, your obscene garbage-armor that held your thin body within its astronautic bulges—still inside which, I sometimes held you.

The brown of the leaves—your corduroy pants, within which you stood straddle-legged, arms out-flung, amidst the mirrors and the echoes of a chilly-floored

room, your voice shooting out like the sun's flares, everywhere—everywhere terrible.

The red of the leaves is the red of your shoes, my favorite shoes, your winter ones, that hid in hard leather your small, leathern feet—shoes that you loathed to put on.

With the fainting of leaves came our frail fellowship: it was in this sullen season that we tumbled ineluctably, unanchored and cast up on invisible billows, set down on each other in reeling and fateful confusion. We rose in the fall and fell in midwinter; these winters are long as the road to Shandaken—each

shudder, each sore tooth a sweet grief remembered.

When it's cold, old beloved, I am recalled to my winter devotions, my half-year of funeral hymns.

(October, 2010)

PSEUDO-SPENSERIAN VERSES WRITTEN ON THE OCCASION OF THE "POET'S" REDISCOVERING AN UNSENT LETTER, WHICH HAD ONCE BEEN INTENDED FOR HIS "MUSE."

I:

Custom it is, when first the poet's pen
Does shake and sputter from its black'ning bath,
To call the Muse, who like the clucking hen
Will peck him till he plods forth on his path.
O Spirit, stay then your officious wrath,
And leave him to his rhymes, tepid and tame;

This poet, alas! no place for muses hath—
His yellow, trembling heart harks not to fame:
His muse is his accuser! He durst not speak her name.

II:

Unrecollected letter, bland mischance
Return'st thou to my weak, unwonting hand,
And to my unquenched eye, by whose dim glance,
Has not in three years' time been sent or scanned.
Though I do dread it, some devil doth command
I break the waxen seal that once I pressed,

In days when my heart waxed full great and grand
And went in Melancholy's motley dressed,
Blurting oaths on blood and Book, till death!—and all the rest.

III:

Ah, *My Dear*—so must all such begin
As shipwrecked, sick of heart, for Heartless grasps
With writ what wit nor wooing could not win,
And all prayers spent, sighs ceaselessly, "Perhaps!"
And then within a corkéd cask entraps

His hopes, for worried waves to careless bear.
But, fool! The wave that o'er thy wreckage laps
Retreats to else but that rare hemisphere
Where sleeps, unstirred by any sea, the one you call *My Dear.*

IV:

"I wish," I wrote—and what I wished befell,
Albeit later than was to my use,
For seems it that she never wished me well
Whose charity my wishes did abuse.
But I did myself my own misfortune choose,

If all complaints of conscience be believed—
If I the Boy-god's sentence could refuse,
Then my collapse was by myself conceived.
Thus are the gods and muses all of fault (and faith) relieved.

V:

What prisoners we are that write and wait!
And through the bars of time look idly down
At peopled streets, and steeples, and broad gates,
And lucky beggars limping through the town.
While we who work for comelier renown,

Do better love our letters than our bread;
We spend our nights bent under candle's crown,
And afternoons marooned on teary beds,
Now damning life's loathsome decay; now wishing we were dead.

VI:

But on I read, this old, new-seeming page:
How plain it speaks! And yet in part opaque;
In three years' passing passed I through an age
And can scarce from crude allusions logic make.

For as in a coursing cruiser's clam'rous wake,
The traveler's knocked aground, deprived of sense:
The dust of my downfall couldst ne'er I shake,
't has fogged my faculties forever hence,
And for my pains, a hollow, haunting hurt's my recompense.

(November, 2010)

TWO FRAGMENTS

I: I think of laying with dead E. M. awhile, my head upon her cold, toppled grave, which I never could restore, and dying some way while lying there – dying among the elder dead, the sound of the rapids beating the branches about and above me – that relentless, boulder-strewn Esopus that blubbers its indecipherable tragedies past the house that S------, faithless muse of mine, abandoned. I think of my bones, too damned and discontented to lie in one place: let the dogs come and take them to every place my soul's gone haunting – under houses, under bridges, up in

attics, in the ashes, at the tombs. Let the bones go in boxes to the addresses of lovers and the lovers that they've taken since they've gone and murdered me. Let there be built around the bones a shrine. Let there be one road leading there and two roads leading away.

II: I wait like a man whose wallet's gone missing for word that my life's been recovered. With my hand on the doorknob: the rousing of my telephone on the wall – two lost rings for two found fingers? I lay my stiff heart against the receiver and it stands, thick with flies, like a slab of dried dung. I pin my thin heart to a clean patch of wall,

but it tears like a shroud off the nail; it tears like a shroud or a veil and slips, thick with death, off the nail. I hang myself like a portrait in the doorframe, and am reflected grotesquely in the knob as I stiffen. Two cold feet for two glass slippers?

(November, 2010)

WHEN YOUR LAST HOUR IS SPENT

I:

When your last hour is spent, my love, reposed amidst the bounty of bouquets that crowd around
The spotless spaces of your peaceful room, and tantalize the stationary air with scents
Undrawn by your dear nose and little breast—will you in waning wakefulness pursue the thought
Of girlhood and the wise girl you had been, when I was old—an old fool—and indeed, your fool?
Is mercurial memory beneficent enough to strike a plunging base relief of us, set deep

In that same inconsequential slab of breast—to stand us in one shadow, swoop and swell, in spite
Of all encumbrance in your rutted heart? That heart did I, your first patron, perjure and curse.

II:

When my last hour is spent (soon, very soon!), in rapt review of my scant sum of years, I will
Double myself as Orientals do, though not so calm as they—for I will weep! I'll weep
As if to rend the weave of time; I'll weep as if to rouse a restive firmament, and dash

My mismade face against the sullen floor, till nothing's left for lovers to recall of me,
Nor of those lips, slug-like and shapeless now, that once with worthless testaments had swarmed. I'll weep,
Till tears flood like the rainbow's word revoked. My teeth will lay broadcast as mustard seeds, and faith!
I'll bleed to rival Harod's bounteous crop of babes, though nothing near as innocent am I.

III:

When your last hour is spent upon this dull, revolving, wispy world, that's laid atop the bones

Of empires now nameless to our tongue—will your hard eye, behind its branchéd lid still flit
From pole to pole beneath its profound arch, to peer at nothings weirdly coalesced into
Gray likenesses of melted winter loves? And asleep, smelling the odiferous rose, will you
Return upon your dainty girlhood feet to that gravesite high-set above the brook, where first
I came to you as furtively arranged, and brought with me two time-profaning blooms—one which
I gave to you, and one to that old grave, which broken near the base lay blind with snow and age?

(November, 2010)

NINTH ANNIVERSARY DIRGE

I:

Ah, day of my second death: what shall I say to announce you? Misty-eyed and windless, the World rends herself awake without stretching, unmoved to see that I have been at her bedside through the night, watching and turning the embers. “The sun?” she inquires. I shrug and say, “It isn’t coming.”

II:

I hold out a white shawl new-drawn from the river, and the ruddy-haired World accepts it. Over her fine freckled shoulders it's slipped; she stands up nobly and nude as a statue. Raising a hand to her fragrant head, she thoughtlessly separates a fistful of locks, which she casts to the floor, disregarding. They scatter and settle here and there at our feet - loops of flame, uncatching and cold. She's old, but the ages don't age her.

III:

"Old World," I begin in my still-morning whisper, "do you know, on this day – " "I remember," she says, "I remember." "Do you

think it not a long time?" I ask, "Nine years – and still so fresh, though so much else eludes recollection!" "Nine years?" scoffs the World, "I have died and been born near twice a score in that time. Now I'm old again, and you've scarcely a line by your lip to betray you. You'll be beating your feet on my grave soon, young man. But where are my nine springtimes in your unfailing memory? Where are my nine weddings, my nine maidenheads?" "Springtimes?" say I, "To my shame, I remember but one."

IV:

The old World turns to face me with her melancholy eyes, and between her two breasts I mark a heart of green-rusted gold, fixed against her flesh like the shadow of a long and long-ago sickness. “How came you by this?” I ask, reaching for it impetuously. With handsome stillness she suffers my touch; the little heart and chain leave carcass-colored stains as my fingertips trace them for a memory. “On the riverbank one morning,” she answers, “washed up after a rain; it is fool’s gold – the cheapest of nothings.” “It was mine once,” I say, “I thought it was lost.” “But it *is* lost,” the sad World assures me. And so I bid her to keep it.

V:

"Ah, this is the day of my second death," I moan, "and there is none that's alive to announce it." "So it is," says the World, and so saying, grows weary – with small, lovely steps, returns to her bed. I watch her again as she passes into slumber, her high, hot cheeks suddenly hollow. My hands in my pockets, I turn to stir the fire with the toe of my shoe. It's cold, I find, past all reviving. So shuffle I also to bed, while I sigh, "Gray, gray goes the morning."

(November, 2010)

LINES IN DEFENSE OF PROSODY

I:

Some jest it is, that I would write in verse
What I could as easily—with more ease still—
Put forth in prose. Already in these lines
You see how my syntax is greatly warped
To fit this weary meter, which you thought
Had been abandoned to the appetites

Of dust, and little worms, and atmosphere.

Ah, well, my friend, I modestly submit
That though the modern eye may well rebel
Against such cloyed and ancient-seeming modes
As this, still will you, without losing much
By way of vigor, come to mark with ease
The meaning of the method I've employed,
And soon enough find yourself less annoyed.

II:

Fashion, as you know, has never shaped
Itself according to the best of sense;

Rather it seems to grope about its course,
For Fashion's sake alone, self-servingly
Advancing 'neath the whips of Vanity
And Commerce—clarion of all that's foul.
A hat, for instance, needs only a brim:
Something to check the rain, retard the sun.
What matter if the brim, then, curves or not,
Or if it rounds the cap, or stands in front,
(For then will Fashion turn it to the back!)
Yet still have brims of all shapes come and gone,

For Fashion's froward fancy, nothing more:
Likewise does Fashion shape our literature.

III:

Yet, at its base, a hat is still a hat—
And hats were made, at one time, to be worn
By everyone, free of pomposity,
Yes—but handsome for their usefulness,
And for the worthy way that they fulfilled
Their guardianship against the weather's whims.
But *words*—claim they an higher pedigree?

Exist they not both to serve and adorn—
Attaining, from mere grunts to pleasantry—
Function compelling, then compelled by Form?
So was it that the holy, chanting bard,
To keep his hoar flock fixed upon his theme,
And his own tongue—with such spans to traverse—
Made poetry, facile to rehearse!

IV:

Pleasant to speak, and pleasant to the ear,
This innovation saved our toiling race

From forgetfulness—so that the best
Of all its feats, and all its follies too,
Could be recalled and gracefully passed down
To those who came to call them fabulous—
These pearls of erudition from their sires.
Imagine if the little whistling finch
Contemned its species' precious native song:
Some while he may hold himself a prince,
Till he calls for a mate and can find none!
Did we err less when we our rhymes forsook?

Now we have books! Aye, princely heaps of books—
But vainly in them for our *memory* look!

V:

Now vainly seek we for our epigraphs,
As we set our brows against the unwrit page,
Which, unbending to our coarser crafts
Impertinent, demands some higher sage!
Like millers we, who grinding out the chaff,
Spy yet no seed; and crying in outrage,
Further despair to hear our machines laugh,

That hear us cursing our own *Golden Age.*
“Prophet,” say they, “produce thy charméd staff,
“Call forth thy substance from this sullen stone!
“Dost thou expect us, on thy low behalf
“To make what thou said thou couldst make alone?”

VI:

We are as pilgrims to some saintly clime,
Who, spurr’d by Pride, detach from our fair train,
And sev’ring ourselves from the true Sublime,
Condemn ourselves to grind against the grain.

But now does Dusk advance; we fret for time:
Our fellows' voices lost in deaf'ning rain;
We have in mind some long-rejected rhyme,
Which, frantic, we would fain recall again.
"Mercy!" we cry, "Alas! We are but men!"
Machines: "You lie! No *men* on earth remain."

(March, 2011)

SONNET

Each tree was a retching Narcissus—
Crook'd and coughing on the sickly creek,
Awaiting the convulsion that would shake
Its last febrile blossom from the branch
That raked its queasy tip along the thick,
Lubricious skin astride the creeping bilge.
Across from where we sat, we watched small cars
Sliding along a road that was obscured
By brown, abandoned stems of ravaged corn,

Like carcasses, filthy with sulking crows.
The sky grew pallid—dimmer by degrees,
And the water seemed to hasten on its way;
I shivered—rose to my feet—asked the hour,
And drank a draught to your youth's drooping flower.

(April, 2011)

TWO MORE FRAGMENTS

I:

Fed by some revolting lyric, I begin again to think of the child we ought to have had together when your body was empty and desperate, and I was empty and desperate lying beside it. A secret blonde curl upon its spherical head, eyes blue and white as an Alpine hot-spring, its soft ballooning arms passed from your arms to my arms to your arms, a heavy kiss in socks and cotton, a quarrel resolved – a splendid, spittle-chinned dilemma. More than any halted fœtus passed from any worried mistress, our unimagined child

lies ungainly on my conscience: my conscience, rocking cradle-like, goes creaking through the night.

II:

Pregnant, pregnant, three quarters of a year blasted in whoredom, an affliction that steps out haughty from the blood-gush and urinates in your eye. After all you gave me, beloved, I might have given you so nothing a thing as this – but. Jealous as I was of my own girl, my first, and worthless as I was with nothing to endow, I said, Nothing is the thing for us now. . . .

(May, 2011)

SONNET

….See, youth itself was then my only wound—
My only guilt, my only mark of shame;
I passed in search of that which could invoke
A pleasure closer to that of regret.

You shake your head? But were you not also
A girl in search of any infamy
By which to be called from the suckling nurse
To Father's chair, with gleeful, frightened heart?

You shake your head. I'll hasten to my point:
Made melancholy by my innocence,
I bought, and listened to religiously,
A tape-recording of a thunder storm—

Sounding, in fact, like that which stops above
This little house, except it had
The doleful bleating of a single sheep:
A maddening sorrow, wrecked against the rain.

But sometimes, as I turned my face toward sleep,
I heard—I thought—the bleating of *two* sheep.

(June, 2011)

POEM

My heart is as a madman
entombed within my chest!
Shaking bars and chains, it flies
From corner to concrete corner,
encrimsons
Its fingers and face,
And falls and mixes froth and
filth and tears,
For love of you, dear girl.

My heart goes wailing through
the cloister's vacant corridors,
Tolling bells and chanting lies
To shame the slouching arches,
still reposed
On blood-raids past;

In Murder's mists, it god-forsaken makes
Its bed with you, my love.

(June, 2011)

SONNET

Gin and tonic was the drink that you most loved,
The drink, it may be said, that made you mine—
If “mine” means “taking what I want from you,”
With “what I want” left still to be defined.

So now, with so much work left to be done,
I count the ice-cubes, slice the rotten lime,
And in the silence of the afternoon,
Prepare the altar for our true farewell.

My love, this taste is not unlike your taste:
Its sweetness fringed by thorny certainty—
Intoxication followed by remorse,
As vow by vow, we lied ourselves to sleep.

We knew it to be hopeless, did we not?
This stillborn love that gin and sin begot.

(June, 2011)

SONNET

I recall when Dick and I sat at the bar,
Two years at least before his dear wife died,
Drinking our gin-and-tonics, full of ice,
Which clashed like lovers on our glasses' sides.

"How long can this go on," I sadly asked,
"My wife and I, so different, so at-odds,
"And yet with hearts so tightly intertwined,
"Like freaks sustained by mad, sadistic gods?"

Dick sighed and said, “What’s love but sacrifice?
“God! Look what my wife gave up to have me!
“There’s no prospect crueler than loneliness;
“There’s nothing we want less than to be free.”

I thought of my wife then, and of our bed,
And smiling, knew the truth of what he said.

(June, 2011)

AUBADE

A restless night, its arms pinned
up behind it,
Gave up to Dawn at last without
a word,
Its eyes seared red and fixed on
damned Apollo,
Recording each cruel sun-jab as
it came.

We lay there, eye-to-eye,
apologetic;
Nymph and satyr, boxed in
awful white;
The end had come and found us
still together;
The Morning, armed so early
with its rage.

I made a furtive movement for
your white arm,
A reverential, breathless finger-
stroke,
And on your lips a question went
unspoken.

In poetry, I said, *there is a genre,*
The name of which I never can
recall,
Devoted solely to the
disappointment

Of lovers
At Dawn's coming.
Did you know?

(June, 2011)

SONNET

I mark, Sweetheart, upon my dim return
The trail that you left when you were here:
A record salvaged, spun, and left uncased;
And *Narcissus and Goldmund* on the floor

Beside the baffled, trauma-stricken bed;
An empty seltzer can and empty glass
And emptiness itself—suspended breath:
A casket-lidded legacy of loss.

Assembling these, I lay them in a line,

And scrutinize the whole with scholar's eyes
For signs of some authorial intent—
Some signifier, sans the Signified.

You came while I was gone, and then you left,
Presence and absence—each a kind of theft.

(July, 2011)

POCATELLO

One would think a place called Middletown would be easier to find.
I was blithe as a boy with an old cow to sell, as through Ellenville
I coasted cleanly, with seven hundred dollars worth of damned slipshod
Repairs beneath a hood held down by coat hangers and rising as if
Laughing in an artificial wind. But for thirty miles out, I drove
And never saw the sign that I was seeking; but at the site of a bad
Accident, I was directed toward Route Two-Eleven, which

Road never a man would love so much as on my long and black
And circling return. But circling now, and white moth-like,
I took the word of strangers—country manna—to my heart,
And drove with faith untypical to give you your bad news.

Pocatello, Pocatello, a name both rude and sonorous,
I found upon a firehouse and, at the corresponding road sign,
Took a turn and started counting numbers in reflective tape
On mailboxes mutely lined in uninviting attitudes of deep
American Malice for this motley passerby. At last I passed

The number you had named,
and turned around; nose-down I
Crept into your strangely naked
driveway, to rest like some
Postcolonial conquistador
behind an unfamiliar, half-
electric car.

O stop! O stop! You oily engines of despair, I cried out
Inwardly, and so withdrew my
key with all reluctance due to
one
Who hitherto had known such
endless joys. The slamming
Of my rheumatic door echoed
against a hundred thousand
secret-hoarding,
Unseen walls, and grass and
trees and ants and things,
whose lives

Went on, quite free of all the bad
news that I had. My hand
Mechanically found the
mechanism, so round, white,
and polite,
By which we kind suburbanites
are summoned to our doors. It
rang,
Plainly, it seems, through halls
and chambers all pristine and
haunted
By the dreams of sleeping
doctors and their wives. (I
ramble, but
My point will soon be made—
and I will make a point to make
it, when it pleases
Me to try. My mind's eye rests,
in pensive twice-tentativeness

Upon this scene, because I would it were believable, so beautiful it was.)

Sweetheart! I heard your footstep and its Aphroditic blooms, traverse
The room and halt; I heard your hand upon the handle of the humble
Haunted door; and, leaning like a moving picture star against your post,
Perceived at once that it was you, and nearly died with love to see
That you were all that I remembered, plus a cat, which, in maidenly

Magnificence you held against your chin, as if to kiss. And you explained
That it was ancient—aged beyond belief, and so I thought, and perhaps said,
That I was too. And the cat mewed when, tenderly, you set it on the floor,
And took my hand, and said, "Come see my room." And I followed,
And sat in oafish silence on your splendid little bed, so bourgeois and exact,
So crafty and intact, so free of fabled acts of fondness, so foolhardy and
Finite. Your mother passed by on the phone, and closed her own

Door, as if to say, “His presence is unknown to me, and anything he does
While he is here, under my roof, is done without my knowing. My conscience
Is clear.” But mine was not; neither was yours; and at the edge of your
Unwrinkled bed, we sat untold inches apart, afraid that anything we touched
Would collapse in putrefaction. So soon, plodding our rotting way into
The living room with all its windows, I nearly invoked Mount Marion,
But spoke instead of Dogwood Lane, and boyhood games of crude croquet,

Then whispered to you the bad news, wishing that you would never see me weep.

(July, 2011)

SONNET

The sun rose as I read my night's Shakespeare
With eyes that passed like water 'cross the page,
And washed the words away, unapprehending,
And only seeking evidence of HER.

O Bard! O god to godless men, descend
And in these plundered phrases, cast your creed
For us; your tablets smashed before the lost
Idolaters, who smelt their gold, for what?

For HER, and for the pantheon

That lies enrubbled through our conquered land,
Immortal, yet once toppled, all forgot,
Their glyphs by drifting sands rubbed clear away.

But Shakespeare would say,
"Pass thee from this stage,
And let the lady keep her love and rage."

(July, 2011)

A TIMEPIECE

Through the trinket shop I take slow steps,
Peering as foreigners do over strings of beads
And pocket books, their interesting textures,
Their reflective alloys. I am a native
To the strangeness of this marketplace—
To the plainness of this bland bazaar—
To this stream of slumbering storefronts with
Their windows blotched and lightless.
Yet here the orphaned Oriental objects

Crank painted eyes toward khaki-panted
Passers, imploring, “Purchase us for nothing—
For a notion; less than a notion—
For the deception of departing with
Less emptiness in hand than when
You took your children in.” I turn,
A whistle of indifference passing soft
Across my lips. What has my sweet discovered?
A timepiece traced with unicorns…
A toy to take the terror from time’s ebbing.

(August, 2011)

SECOND SUN

The morning light was newer then, wasn't it?
When the awakening air arrested my breath,
And I stole closer to your sleep-wide lips
To venerate their hot exhalations.

New-born then, the Sun of my second life
Amazedly gazed on, pressing our windows;
I shared his amazement each morn, my love—
I beheld you and shared in his amazement.

When youth was the bower we burrowed in,
Thatched carelessly—fearing no observation,
We trembled for joy and wept in our elation,
And the Sun cooed from high in his cradle.

So too were we lofty and much aloof
To the discordant and dissembling heart-worms
That gnawed like the gnawing of conscience
On the cords of our former abortions.

Second Sun, new life, since unseated—

I awaken now, amazed at your absence;
The cold of the morning collects in my lungs
And numbs me through the day and through the evening.

(August, 2011)

SONNET

All day, like Tantalus at water's brink,
I stooped, to find my reward from me shrink,
And with each deeper, wearier descent,
Became no less thirsty—just further bent.

Observe me, thin and whittled down by age,
As through old books I labor, page-by-page,
Watching the clock make each merciless round,
While Time pursues me with her gnashing hounds.

So if I flee, unheeded, to the plains,
At forest's end, they find my scent again,
And by no means can I hope to erase
The musk of lucklessness by which I'm traced.

O World! Look thus to your misconceived son,
And tell him when his work of failure's done.

(October, 2011)

POEM, NEVER-COMPLETED

You think yourself to have been cursed, my Sweet,
And beset by some subtle stratagem,
For when your nightly repast is complete,
You yearn yet for some rare *crème de la crème:*
A dainty treat,
Served warm and neat,
Which no degree of virtue can condemn.

My girl, my genius girl, most holy muse,
Who of a morning made of me a saint,
What curse? What calumny would you accuse

Me of, if e'en proclaiming your complaint,
You can't conceal
The joy surreal,
Of which you tasted, tossing all restraint

To the wind—as we went, we royal three,
Around us each, and every one a wound,
Which, sensing one another's malady,
Our clumsy analgesic to each spooned,
However tart;
Our finest art
Was in feathers and ivory festooned.

But this is past. Merely to speak of it
Bestirs in me a maelstrom of remorse,
Not o'er my flouting of some sacred writ,
Nor of my loving "for better or worse,"
But simply this:
Your faultless kiss
Had been so wayward in its winding course

To these, my ancient lips, and this my tongue,
And this my flesh, so raggedly arrayed,
And o'er my bones like dirty laundry hung,
And for the world all shamelessly displayed,

And once arrived,
So briefly lived,
So hurriedly to new adventures strayed!

But now—this curse you say that I have dealt:
You're sure that it was not, in truth, a pact?
Recall'st thou not how knee-to-knee we knelt,
And in whispers too fragile to retract,
Intoned an oath—
Plighted our troth,
That each would be what e'er the other lacked;

That each would to the other one be all,

Heaven and earth and love and hurt and lust,
And animal and angel? I recall
How all of this, in one united breath
We solemnly
Knelt knee-to-knee
And with the band of faith our four hands trussed

Together, so tightly neither could tell
Which mind could move which digit or which wrist,
Or from which breast the sentiment first swelled,
Which following, we dutifully kissed,
And kissed again,
And kissed again,

And kissed again, and kissed again, and kissed.

My love, were it my privilege to return
That polyandrous heart which you have lost,
I truly would—though it meant that you'd spurn
The heart with which your heart is now engross'd.
But vows are vows,
And anyhow,
You know as well as I do "you're the boss!"

Ah! My love, my love, I sympathize!
I'd tear out my own heart if yours did fail,

If you were blind, I'd give you both my eyes,
And be yours still, heartless, sightless, and frail
From wandering
And pondering
And cursing that blessing from which you ail,

And blessing that dear curse from which you waste,
I'd fall before your feet, if it would mean
That by your kick my ribcage would be graced,
Releasing all the bile in my spleen,
Which, spilling out,
Without a doubt,
Would mean the death which alone can redeem

My life, for which impatient deities
Do wait; pacing the planks of Paradise….

(April, 2012)

EMMA

She spoke with her head lowered, face obscured
By straight planes of brown hair, all pinioned down
Beneath a black and broad-brimmed hat of masculine
Appearance; her hands childishly wrapped
Before her on the apron that she wore,
Her eyes fixed on a glass of earth-brown beer.

I listened, sometimes to her, sometimes to
The crowing of a girl who played guitar
In choppy downward strums, while singing words

That charged like infantrymen over those
Of my companion, bayonets upraised,
And swept them off like natives, brave but doomed.

But leaning close, as drunkards like to do,
I watched her lips and tried to match the tones
That she pronounced with their near-motionless
Half-measures, two sleepy instruments
Played in accord by dozing virtuosos.
I hummed that melody the whole way home,

And whistled it on the doorstep, with my key
Finding the lock somehow effortlessly.

(May, 2012)

WEDDING SONG

When once I wore a silver wedding ring,
I wore it as a vulgar mockery
Of true marriage, which now I understand
Begins on earth, and eventually ends
On earth also: a compact of the flesh,
And made only to service fleshly ends.

I wonder, then, by what tragic impulse
My wife and I were married in a church,
Impugning God by implicating Him

In our bond, which was beastly as any
Crude union performed in a fencéd yard,
Attended by some dull-eyed farmer's lad.

Performing Nature's errands, why do we
Insist upon invoking God's blessing—
When God was never in the least concerned
With how or why we brought forth progeny,
Or, least of all, with whom we conceived,
Since soul-for-soul, one's as good as the next.

I'll tell you something about Father God:
His ways are not ours ways, nor is his mind—
He knows no anger, knows no jealousy,
Knows only Himself—a very Narcissus,
Whose self-love resulted in Creation,
And by whose endless ego all's sustained.

I'll tell you something, also, of marriage:
It has nothing to do with one's "soul-mate,"
For there is but one mate for every soul
And that is God Himself, in which every

Soul has its beginning, and returns
When flesh and its false bonds are forgotten.

Forgive me, wife, for ever caring that
Your flesh and mine were never exclusive:
You had been cultivated previously,
And I, a human, was a jealous fool,
And so were you, my beauty, my savior!
Our love was nothing but idolatry.

Here is my resolution, on the brink

Of the new age—the true apocalypse:
I'll not marry again for any cause
But lust and loneliness and (maybe) love.
Never will I the Deity invoke,
Expecting that He cares with whom I merge.

That being said, I cordially invite
Any woman who, being smart and fair,
And wond'ring when her "Prince Charming" will come,
Has haplessly tripped past her thirtieth year
To make my kind acquaintance, and perhaps
To marry me and be my body-mate

For as long as our bodies are alive,
And there is grass to tread and air to breathe.
Whoever you are, my beloved one,
I have only this slight requirement:
That as my wife, you recognize me as
The twin of God, as you are—thus *my* twin.

Thus shall we be bod'ly inseparable—
Lovers for whom love comes effortlessly,
Flourishing on the knowledge that our kin
Are one with both our fleshly and sublime

Aspects: and thus the Lord and Satan both,
As are we all, we vassals of Decay.

(April, 2012)

TODAY'S PRAYER

I am not well, my love, I am not well;
The thing's confirmed—it's never been in doubt:
In all of God's creation, I am proof
That God's mistakes are ours to make, and ours
To suffer under, on behalf of Him
For whom no suffering is possible.

The day is bright, my love, but I am ill;
The humble efforts of a thousand birds
Infect my ears; a sun sturdy, unfailing,

Fails me! It took its throne—I woke
And went firstly to the bottle of gin
That is my sun, crown, and escutcheon.

I, in my vanity, anticipate
The coming of another heartless love,
Who, beaming beams of pure divinity
Will fail, like the sun, to 'luminate
My dullard soul, my sluggard, stupid self,
Who is to God as God is to a speck

Of excrement. I have forgotten how

To hope, or to believe in anything
Beyond the anguish I've inherited
From my ancestors, whose pain was quelled by Death,
And only Death—not a moment before.
And so I pray to Death, my patroness,

Whose promise is the Nothing that I crave,
Whose bony hands hold the two instruments
Of my redemption—scales and a scythe:
The one to cut me down, just like a weed,
The other to measure my puckered heart,

And find that it's still dense
enough to keep.

But here amongst the gardens
and the birds—
Here amongst the vast,
implacable
Fields of marigolds and
businessmen,
And sculptured saints with their
Master's Degrees;
Here amidst the Nature and the
Will,
I am a darkness irredeemable.

Amen.

(April, 2012)

FRAGMENTARY REFLECTIONS UPON TURNING THIRTY

I:

On my second decade's culminating night,
I was alone. I went to buy some beer.
At first the shop's lumbering proprietor
Rang me up without question; then before
He closed the till, he asked me absently
If I had my ID. It was as if
An imp of doubt came hissing to his ear,
Awakening him abruptly to the thought

That, even though he'd sold me beer before,
I might, since then, have by some miracle
Turned back the mechanisms of decay
And, like a Hollywood Methuselah,
Made shrift to mature retrogressively
(A trick that drinking canned six-packs of beer
Shipped from St. Louis doesn't often do,
However much we wish the Fount of Youth
Were found on tap at every corner bar,
Instead of reeking swill and memories

Of times, neither recalled nor memorable,
When youth was cast like currency upon
The gorged carcasses of our future selves.)
I was prepared for this. Reaching into
My breast pocket, I produced my passport
With an apology in which I claimed
That I had somehow managed to "misplace"
My driver's license—silly, silly me.
Such are the frequent perils that are faced
By those who like to be their own chauffers

With eight pints washing warmly in their guts.
Laying the booklet out for the cashier,
I bore a long and puzzled scrutiny,
Which he concluded with a marveling look,
And shaking his head, said, “Nineteen eighty-two!”
“I turn thirty tomorrow,” I replied,
“Would you believe?” I took my change and left.

II:

That night I drank some of the beer I’d bought,
And some I had left over, room temperature

And rank; and every hour I went down
To piss it out again, then up to drink some more,
And so on, till my stomach ailed me—
For this is how I have contrived to break
My ancient bondage to whiskey and gin,
As if to depart from this path of shards
By the same gate at which I first arrived,
Full sixteen years ago (still vivid, yet!),
When on some moldering stretch of steel tracks,
Decades disused and hid in overgrowth,

My friend—nineteen years old, quick to corrupt—
Presented me with my first can of beer.
No greater gift can a man give, I thought,
Than to risk apprehension on a lark.
I required no inducement; we tapped our tins
Congenially, and I drank without reserve—
Leaping into dark waters all at once,
Taking no thought of frigidness or depth,
Taking no thought of shallowness or cold,
Only wanting to be old, as I am now;

Only wanting to be old, as I am now.
I pondered this last night, drinking my beer,
And following my own voice as it trailed
From my radio—some record I had made
In those days when the songs poured from my pen
Like oil from a tanker's mangled hull,
That chokes the fish and suffocates the birds,
And halts the tides and turns the thriving sea
Into a pyre and a black funereal waste.
Such were these records that I made,

Such were these songs, these "little suicides,"
These too-deliberate cracks through which I spilled
The toxins I was trusted to contain.
Drinking, I listened; listening, I drank,
And rose sometimes when struck by some regret
From which I must have thought I could escape
By taking ten small paces back and forth,
Raking my hair with greasy fingertips,
As one does who's exhausted all his wits;
Then circling back and falling on my bed,

I closed my eyes, allowed my head to fall,
Borne down by thirty years, but for a day,
Of vanity, venality and vice,
Toils never rewarded, virtues lost
Upon a world whose love I never sought.

III:

And so I slept, as generally I do,
When womankind affords me rare respite,
With the New Testament clutched in my hand,
From which I had been reading in Matthew.
I had considered, having no bedmate,

How fitting this would be, among all nights,
For once more taking out a razorblade,
And driving one last charge against my wrists:
A final, frenzied raid upon the walls
Of mercy that stand obstinate and stern
Before the catapults of self-contempt,
Refusing that Death takes whom she desires;
Repulsing him who begs the hand of Death—
To never have to open up my eyes
Upon a world that I've known thirty years;

To never have to peer back in dismay
At thirty years of life in blindness lived;
To never have to take another step
Beyond this blank landscape of thirty years;
To never have to see myself become
The stain that I'll be thirty years from now.
Some time I lay, by these musings transfixed,
Till I recalled the Book still in my hand,
Wherein it tells that Jesus Christ himself
Passed thirty years in great obscurity,

And he was also tempted, at this age,
To cast himself upon the rocks and die;
That all his life, he never passed beyond
The bounds of his homeland of Galilee,
And no two gospels ever could agree
On what he said, or what he meant by it.
Christ's death-wish, surely, was no less than mine;
He knew that he was digging his own grave,
And when he vowed to tear the temple down,
He brought the hornet's nest down on his head.

But had he been twenty or twenty-five,
The patriarchs would have brushed him aside
As full of boyish braggadocio—
A smart-mouthed fob with fire in his blood.
Now, all my life, I've been called verbose;
And, like Jesus, I've discussed little else
Besides myself and the apocalypse to come.
Accused of arrogance, I've borne the scourge
Of self-importance and perceived neglect,
My friends forever visiting my tomb,
To find it empty and my substance fled.

And when upon some road I'm recognized
By anyone who claims to know my form,
I flit away, exclaiming, "Touch me not!
For I've yet to ascend, or rise at all...."

(July, 2012)

FIRST SONNET TO J.

BELOVED, however much you may distrust
These doubtful looks of mine, kindly and pained,
And vacant otherwise, but haunted with
A vacancy more solid than the flesh:
However much these looks of mine you doubt,
If--by God! If only you could know
The awful love--*maiming* love they contain,
To see you, legs crossed, beaming on the bed!
The trust, the grief, the giving up of hope,
And taking cheer, and raking off

of years--
There, darling! *There* I set my heart,
(With sooty hands, eager but hesitant)
No longer beating, quite--not even warm,
But yours to mold, like stiff clay, to your form.

(February, 2013)

SECOND SONNET TO J.

You must reveal to me someday, my dear,
By what ungodly art you have preserved
This creature's spark, which, appearing to decay,
Its putrefaction cannot penetrate
The deepest parts, tender, primordial,
Through extinctions and ice-ages and floods!
(With all resentment passing like a bark
Laden with shades, through some moonlit canal.)
I thought myself once sensitive and weak…
Perhaps I am weak still. Though what weakness

It is that causes me to cling to you
Like Death upon an infant's sleeping lips
I do not know. This only can I say:
It is your bier, bears my dry tears away.

(February, 2013)

BELATED LINES FOR A BURIED CAT

A “little life” we sometimes called you, for
Your time, compared to ours, was short, and yet
Your days were long—and in that meager space
That spanned our first acquaintance and your death,
Your bore me (fingers tangled in your fur)
Through, God! How many perishings? When I,
The only mourner in my train, and you,
The only watcher at my wake, we two
Were all-in-all: twin satellites of woe,

Revolving—as calamity
ordained—
About a coal-black mass of
ironies
Still undefined. And not for
nothing, Sam,
You took no more companions
after me;
And when I left, you taught me
how to die.

(May, 2013)

END.